

# Communities Can Make Health Affordable

BY LAURIE OGILVIE, MANAGER OF AQUATICS AND FITNESS FOR THE CITY OF KANATA, ONTARIO

"Four more, three more, two more!" This is a familiar phrase to anyone who has ever taken an aerobics class, but for many women it is one that they will never be able to afford to hear. For many, health is only for the rich.

In every community in Canada there are women struggling with poverty. The daily balance of financial and physical survival, often combined with raising a family, dramatically affects the health of these women. Daily physical activity, healthy food choices and effective stress management are not part of their lifestyle but rather a luxury.

Limited incomes, the cost of recreational programs and sporting equipment, the distance and cost of getting to health programs and a lack of affordable child care can restrict women from accessing fitness and health activities within their communities.

## Women Alive

So where do these women go? Since 1998, over 60 women living in the City of Kanata have been attending the Women Alive program offered by the City's Recreation Department. Woman Alive offers women living on limited incomes fitness programs and health education for \$1 per class. The program incorporates financial aid for transportation and sporting equipment, free child care and a supervised swim program for the children.

Vicki Dumouchel, 37, has been attending the program since its introduction. Dumouchel, a mother of four children, aged four to nine years, had always wanted to participate in something outside the home that would help her lose weight.

What she found in the Woman Alive program was a focus on a healthy body image, toning and muscle building, and

opportunities to learn about healthy eating habits, consumer tips and health awareness. Dumouchel says she has learned many interesting facts about her health since beginning the program.

"The women have become a close knit group and the program becomes a social activity which you look forward to attending," Dumouchel asserts.

The Woman Alive program was developed by Eva Stewart Bindernagel, PHN, and Laurie Ogilvie to provide an affordable, fun environment for women to participate in a health and fitness program at the community level.

## Helping Women

The idea originated from a desire to integrate the benefits of health and fitness, and target a population in the community that had been traditionally overlooked. The program started after an observation during the recreation department's annual performance measurement review that in almost every "request for subsidy" the department received, women requested program subsidies for their children. The department wanted to create a program that would address the primary health provider in the home: the woman.

In 1997, the process of planning Woman Alive began. By integrating resources from the City of Kanata and the Region of Ottawa-Carleton Health Department and with funding from the Regional Heart Beat partner, a program plan was established.

Staff were trained, the program schedule was created and the program was marketed extensively. In September 1997, the program was officially launched. Unfortunately, only four participants registered and by the fourth week no one was attending the program.

## Planning Anew

Unwilling to abandon the idea of Woman Alive, Eva and Laurie evaluated the program's success, or lack of, and started planning anew.

The first step was to understand what were the health and fitness needs and wants of the target population. To do this, several focus groups were conducted over a three-month period with women in the target population. Information was collected, but more importantly, participants in the focus groups were intrigued by the idea of Woman Alive and became an important link to the community.

Next, the Community Resource Centre of Goulbourn, Kanata and West Carleton became involved as the marketer of the Woman Alive program. As a primary community contact, the Resource Centre understood women in the community who could benefit from Woman Alive.

In the final step, women who had participated in the focus groups were personally contacted and invited to attend the program. They were also encouraged to bring a friend or two. In September 1998, the program was relaunched, and in its first week was registered to capacity with a substantial waiting list.

## Partnerships

Woman Alive is a unique collaboration between the City of Kanata, the Region of Ottawa-Carleton Health Department and Regional Heart Beat. The program offers a combination of aerobic and aquatic fitness programs and health education.

Specifically, there are two aquatic fitness classes and one aerobic class per week, corresponding free daycare/supervised aquatic swim programs for the children and workshops on heart health topics such as stress reduction, healthy eating, label reading in supermarkets, alternative health services, parenting workshops, information on specific women's health concerns and cooking demonstrations.

In addition, Woman Alive participants have had an opportunity to attend a fitness instructor course, CPR/First Aid training and Bronze Cross certification - all cost free. The goal is to encourage personal development, provide employment skills and poten-

tially develop participants into program leaders. In fact, one Woman Alive participant currently teaches Femme Active, a francophone version of Woman Alive in the Lowertown Community of Ottawa.

The social aspect of the program is also significant. Participants of the program have created a strong support network and have enjoyed seasonal dinners, symposiums and potluck lunches.

"There is a family feeling here. There is something about it you just don't want to miss," says Laurie Sauve, Woman Alive participant. A few years ago Sauve, 57, suffered a heart attack. Today she walks to work everyday and credits her lifestyle change to the Woman Alive program.

In February 1999, the Woman Alive program was honored by the Ottawa - Carleton Health Coalition, Regional Heart Beat, by

winning in the Community at Large division at the annual Heart Beat Awards. However, the program had taken three years to reach this level of success.

"The program started slowly. The first year we offered the program we only had four participants. This year we had a waiting list of 25. We are really pleased with the support we have received from the community," says Ogilvie.

The program relies heavily on the generosity of its community partners. Each month several local health professionals donate their time to present various seminars, interactive workshops and demonstrations. Local retailers have also been supportive in donating sports equipment like running shoes, bathing suits and prizes. Hansen's "Your Independent Grocer" donated a \$100 gift certificate as a prize for the

Christmas dinner. The winner, who often accesses the Food Bank, was overwhelmed with the certificate.

Daily physical activity, healthy eating and stress management are not a luxury. Everyone deserves to access these recreational services irrespective of their income. The health of a community starts within that community!

For more information on the Woman Alive program you can call Mary Pat Arnett 724-4122 (26163). •

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*Laurie Ogilvie is the 2000 recipient of the CPRA Claude Langelier Award For Young Professionals.*